

Using Feedback and Success Criteria to Empower Students

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This guest post is written by Tara Reed, a fourth grade ELA teacher at Hawk Elementary School in Denton ISD.

Being reflective is essential. Whether done by the teacher or the student, reflection allows an opportunity to think closely on one topic, make decisions about work, or ask peers for some feedback.

Last spring I took some time to interview kids about their interactions with feedback and co-constructed criteria. One thing I learned about my students was that they hunger for feedback. They crave someone with whom to collaborate, discuss, rehearse, revise, and reflect.

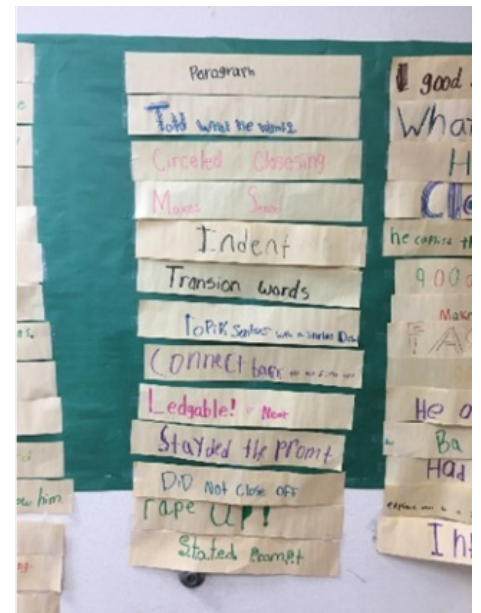
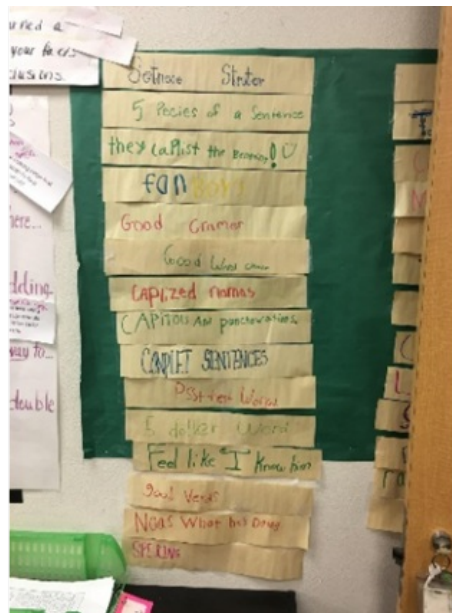
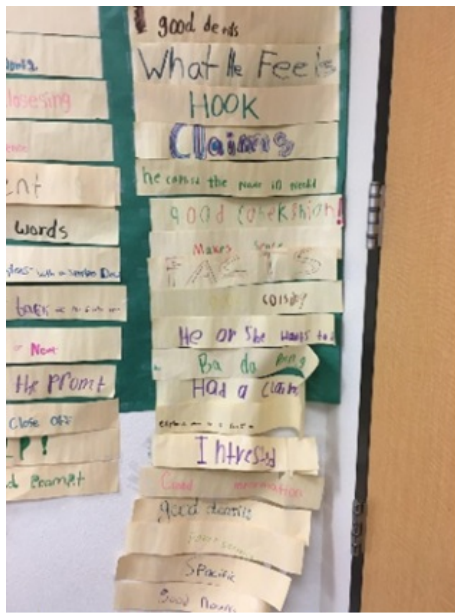
I am a big believer in the idea that words have power. Sometimes feedback itself can be somewhat intimidating because of the power it can wield over students. If delivered in a way that is perceived to be judgmental or at a time when they aren't receptive, it will fall on deaf ears.

I love feedback because I realize what a powerful tool it is in moving kids forward. John Hattie, a leader in educational research and effect size, says that "the most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback." The feedback between student partners is where, in my opinion, we should sit for a while and just listen.

When I asked one student the best part about using success criteria with their writing partner for feedback, he thought for a moment and said, "It gives you something to work on, like a goal to reach." I sat stunned thinking to myself, Whoa! This practice matters. This student gets it. He and his partner (not someone he was already familiar with in the beginning, but a new learning partner) were hungry. They got that it mattered. This child realized the value in having another person with whom to share his work. He valued her input. He knew that whatever she had to say, it would be something he could use to make his work stronger. That's empowering! Later on, another student said that she liked when her feedback was specific because it helped to know exactly what needed improvement. Here was another student confident enough to share exactly what she desired in her peer feedback.

Listening to these ten-year-olds reflect on their own practices in the classroom confirmed for me the necessity of success criteria and descriptive feedback. The kids didn't say they had a vague idea of some strategies to try. They did not suggest that their time with their partner was ineffective because they didn't really know how to help each other. They said that they had clear, specific ideas they could easily grab and offer to their partner. They asked for the same thoughtfulness and clarity in the feedback they received.

Getting to this point in the year took some time. The students analyzed lots of mentor text. They collaboratively noticed and named craft moves that stood out to them. They debated the necessity of some of what they noticed and then determined whether or not to include these items in what it meant to be successful as in opinion writing. The work was hard. It definitely wasn't for the faint at heart; however, when the time came to work with their partner (or teacher) in giving and receiving feedback, they felt confident in what they were doing because they were the owners of all that work naming what it took to create a well-written, organized piece of writing. They had practiced over and over again what it meant to give feedback that was intentional, focused, and meant to help them move forward in their learning.



Jan Chappuis said, “The role of effective descriptive feedback is to help identify where the learner is now with respect to where they are headed and to prompt further learning.” This is what I want for all kids—the type of environment where they take the reins and work together to create, reflect, discuss, revise, and confidently forge a path for themselves to become better than they are today. I want to facilitate that learning, but also know when to get out of the way and let them fly.